

God Changes the Rules (Acts 10:1-17)^a

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Context

1. **Peter was performing miracles while traveled from Jerusalem down to Joppa on the seacoast.**

Passage (Acts 10:1-17)

[1] There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment, [2] a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always. [3] About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius!" [4] And when he observed him, he was afraid, and said, "What is it, lord?" So he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God. [5] "Now send men to Joppa, and send for Simon whose surname is Peter. [6] He is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea. He will tell you what you must do." [7] And when the angel who spoke to him had departed, Cornelius called two of his household servants and a devout soldier from among those who waited on him continually. [8] So when he had explained all these things to them, he sent them to Joppa. [9] The next day, as they went on their journey and drew near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour. [10] Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat; but while they made ready, he fell into a trance [11] and saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth. [12] In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. [13] And a voice came to him, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." [14] But Peter said, "Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean." [15] And a voice spoke to him again the second time, "What God has cleansed you must not call common." [16] This was done three times. And the object was taken up into heaven again. [17] Now while Peter wondered within himself what this vision which he had seen meant, behold, the men who had been sent from Cornelius had made inquiry for Simon's house, and stood before the gate.¹

Overcoming the Jew/Gentile Barrier

1. **Cornelius - a Roman soldier, a Gentile**
2. **A member of the third geographical region and people group which Jesus mentioned.²**
 - A. **Prior to His ascension, Jesus promised, . . . you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in**

Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8).

- B. Could read: *But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me [to three people groups: the Jews, the Samaritans, and the Gentiles].***
- C. Jesus made distinctions between these same three people groups, *These twelve Jesus sent out and commanded them, saying: “Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”* (Mat. 10:5-6).**
- I. Jews → considered clean**
 - II. Samaritans → considered partly clean**
 - III. Gentiles → considered unclean**
 - a. Later, Peter will explain to Cornelius’ household, *You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. . . .* (Acts 10:28a)**
- D. Step out of our twenty-first century Gentile Christian mindset and attempt to understand issues revealed by events recorded within the book of Acts.**
- I. Were Gentiles going to be part of God’s establishment of this new sect, called “The Way?”**
 - II. If so, how were they to identify with Jewish religious observance? Did they need to be circumcised? Keep the Law of Moses?**
 - III. Were they, as before, considered as being at a lesser level than Jews? Would their access to certain religious sites or practices be restricted?**
- 3. God moving to push both sides together**
- A. Angelic vision prompting Cornelius to send for Simon Peter**
 - B. Heavenly vision prompting Peter to no longer consider unclean what God had cleansed**
 - C. Who or what separated them to begin with?**
 - I. Old testament ceremonial law identified certain foods, objects, conditions, and practices as “unclean.”**

II. Contact with unclean items rendered one unclean.

- a. Akin to the pink stuff which gets on everything in the Dr. Seuss book, *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back*, but much more serious (e.g., Lev. 11:29-35).
- b. Gentiles, knowing nothing of the clean/unclean distinction within the Law of Moses, would routinely be in contact with unclean things and therefore, were considered unclean themselves.

III. Jews were prohibited from intermarriage with the Gentile nations of Canaan (Deu. 7:1-3).

IV. Gentile presence is said to defile God's temple (Eze. 44:5-9; Acts 21:28).

V. Jesus refers to Jews as "children," but refers to a Syro-Phoenician woman and her daughter as "little dogs" in comparison (Mark 7:27). (Dogs being unclean, according to the Law of Moses.)

VI. Seen in the actions of the religious leaders at the trial of Jesus

- a. . . . *they led Jesus from Caiaphas to the Praetorium, and it was early morning. But they themselves did not go into the Praetorium, lest they should be defiled, but that they might eat the Passover* (John 18:28).

A Change in God's Economy

1. Is there really a change here?

A. "All kinds" of four-footed animals: including those which did not have cloven hooves or chew cud (Lev. 11:6-7).

B. "Creeping things"

- I. **ἑρπετά** [*herpeta*] from **ἑρπετόν** [*herpeton*] → "reptile, that which has mobility by creeping along."
- II. *These also shall be unclean to you among the creeping things that creep on the earth: the mole, the mouse, and the large lizard after its kind; the gecko, the monitor lizard, the sand reptile, the sand lizard, and the chameleon. These are unclean to you among all that creep. Whoever touches them when they are dead shall be unclean until*

evening (Leviticus 11:29–31).

- C. Peter's emphatic response: ***Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common [ἀκάθαρτον [akatharton]] or unclean (Acts 10:14).***
- D. ***Peter wondered within himself what this vision which he had seen meant . . . (Acts 10:17)***
- I. "Wondered" is **διηπόρει [diēporei]** from **διαπορέω [diaporeō]**, to *doubt* (rendered as such in the KJV)
 - II. ESV renders as "inwardly perplexed"
 - III. NASB renders as "greatly perplexed in mind"
 - IV. NET renders as, "puzzling over"
- E. **Peter takes heat for his actions**
- I. ***Now the apostles and brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him, saying, "You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them!" (Acts 11:1-3).***

2. One New Man

- A. **The heavenly voice explained, *What God has cleansed [past tense] you must not call common (Acts 10:15)***
- I. **Past tense: *has cleansed* → some action by God resulted in removing the separation which made Gentiles unclean → the cross.**
- B. ***Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands— that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace (Eph. 2:11-15)***
- C. **God is making a CHANGE: from dealing almost exclusively with the theocracy of Israel to the body of Christ, which begins almost exclusively**

Jewish, but eventually becomes predominantly Gentile, as it is today.

I. Evidence of this shift:

- a. **Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, “Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” And He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” (Acts 1:6–8)**

II. How will Peter, Paul, and others handle this HUGE CURVE BALL from God

- a. **Something not revealed in the OT: the Church, the body of Christ, a mystery (Eph. 3:3-6; Col. 1:26-27)**
- b. **The author of Hebrews refers to changes which came with Christ’s work on the cross as *the time of reformation* (Heb. 9:10).**
- i. **“Reformation” is διορθώσεως [*diorthōseōs*] from διόρθωσις [*diorthōsis*] → “a new order, implying a change from a former state”**
- c. **God is introducing CHANGES from what went before: the divine economy for Old Testament Israel — a theocracy.**

III. Caveat: Peter’s situation is not the same as ours!

- a. **A unique historical situation: the formation of the body of Christ**
- b. **New teaching and revelation**
- c. **No New Testament yet - the canon is still in formation, not yet closed**

Continuity vs. Discontinuity

1. **Continuity - what remains the same from OT, through the preaching of John the Baptist, through the gospels, through Acts and on through the NT?**
2. **Discontinuity - what changes as God’s progressive revelation and program proceed through history?**
3. **Consider these statements of Jesus**

- A. **CONTINUITY:** *Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; . . .* (Mat. [5:17-19](#))
- B. **DISCONTINUITY:** *Then He [Jesus] spoke a parable to them: “No one puts a piece from a new garment on an old one; otherwise the new makes a tear, and also the piece that was taken out of the new does not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine will burst the wineskins and be spilled, and the wineskins will be ruined. But new wine must be put into new wineskins, and both are preserved. And no one, having drunk old wine, immediately desires new; for he says, ‘The old is better.’ ”* (Luke [5:36–39](#))
- C. **DISCONTINUITY:** *There is nothing that enters a man from outside which can defile him; but the things which come out of him, those are the things that defile a man. . . . Do you not perceive that whatever enters a man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and is eliminated, thus purifying all foods?* (Mark [7:15-19](#))⁶

I. Paul, in his letter to Timothy, states: *For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving* (1 Timothy [4:4](#)).

- D. **QUESTION:** Although God Himself doesn't change, is God allowed to make changes in how He deals with people in different groups at different times in history?

4. This is a **BIG DEAL** and has sweeping ramifications, both personally, and for society.

- A. **FIRST:** Can a person who is steeped in the Old Testament, make it over the “speed bump” of the progressive revelation provided within the New Testament wherein God institutes change?

I. Jacob Neusner, Jewish academic scholar of Judaism (has published more than 950 books)

Christian faith finds a legion of reasons for believing in Jesus. . . but not because he fulfilled the Torah or sustained the Torah or conformed to the Torah; not because he improved on the Torah. But, of course, Christian faith has never found troubling the fact of its own autonomy: not a mere continuation and reform of the prior faith, Judaism . . . , but a new beginning.⁷

a. In response to Jesus' teaching that nothing that enters a man from outside can defile him . . .

. . . I believe God has given a different Torah from the one that Jesus teaches; and that Torah, the one Moses got at Sinai, stands in judgment of the torah of Jesus. . . ⁸

B. SECOND: As a Christian, how do we read the Bible? How do we put it all together?

Was Israel the OT Church—are OT promises to God's national people fulfilled in the church today? Or, is Mosaic Law binding on believers now—are [twenty-first-century] Christians to obey the Ten Commandments, including sabbath observance?⁹

C. THIRD: Law requires an objective moral basis. Historically, in the United States, that basis was the Bible.

I. How are the moral teachings of the Bible to inform the day-to-day laws within a country which attempts to honor God's Word?

II. What will the penalties be?

- a. **For sex outside of marriage (fornication)?**
- b. **For adultery?**
- c. **For abortion?**
- d. **For homosexual behavior?**
- e. **For . . . children who curse their parents?**

III. Where Scripture shows variation, how do we respond?

D. What hangs in the balance?

I. These are not theological issues, but intensely practical!

a. Issues of faith, can we accept the full teaching of both testaments?

- i. Christians often hold inconsistent and contradictory understandings of Scripture, never bothering to wrestle with the inconsistencies which result.

b. What should we, as Christians, be about?

- i. We are to be salt and light, but how should that work out in the political arena?

c. How should our country incorporate or be influenced by the Bible? Can a secular government really be moral?

- i. Every system of law “legislates morality” - so who determines what is moral?
- ii. It simply won't due to say “the Bible,” because the Bible must be interpreted and there are distinctions between OT and NT practice: *progressive revelation*.

II. Failure to recognize continuity: introducing change or separation where none was intended by God

a. Over-compartmentalization of New Testament teaching

- b. **Example: “None of Jesus’ teachings in the gospels is for the Church today” (but see Mat. 28:19-20; John 14:26)**

III. Failure to recognized discontinuity: rejecting all change and progressive revelation

- a. **Retaining behavior or punishment which does not reflect God’s intention for our society today.**

- b. **Example: Is the Church today to be governed by priests? Should it follow a “Moses model” - based on how Moses led during the Theocracy of Israel?**

c. Example: Theonomy

- i. Theos + Nomos → God’s law - reestablish a theocracy like Israel in the Old Testament, but today
- ii. Theonomy, also known as “Christian Reconstructionism” promotes the idea that the Mosaic Law should be observed by modern societies.
- iii. It promotes goals such as ““the universal development of Biblical theocratic republics”, exclusion of non-Christians from voting and citizenship, and the application of Biblical law by the state. Under such a system of Biblical law, homosexual acts, adultery, witchcraft, and blasphemy would be punishable by death. Propagation of idolatry or “false religions” would be illegal and could also be punished by the death penalty.”¹⁰
- iv. “Theonomic ethics, to put it simply, represents a commitment to the necessity, sufficiency, and unity of Scripture. For an adequate and genuinely Christian ethic, we must have God’s word, only God’s word, and all of God’s word. Nearly every critic of theonomic ethics

will be found denying, in some way, one or more of these premises.”¹¹

v. Misdirected zeal

IV. Responsibility for properly handling distinctions in God’s Word

a. The more powerful the weapon, the greater the responsibility (e.g., squirt gun vs. atomic missile)

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Endnotes:

1. [NKJV](#), (Acts 10:1-17)
2. Previously, Philip explained the gospel to a Gentile: the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-39). But there is no indication during that encounter that the Holy Spirit had yet been poured out upon Gentiles.
3. [Ref-0399](#), 1Ti. 4:4, p. 2355
4. [Ref-0565](#), Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the First Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to Timothy, 13:445
5. [Ref-0415](#), 82
6. “Whereas under the law there was a distinction of meats between clean and unclean (such sorts of flesh they might eat, and such they might not eat), all this is now taken away; and we are to call nothing common or unclean, Acts 10:15.”³ “What then, is not swine’s flesh unclean? By no means, when it is received with thanksgiving, and with the seal; nor is anything else. It is your unthankful disposition to God that is unclean. — John Chrysostom”⁴ “Thus the ordinary prohibitions of the law disappear, for in this respect as in others the law made nothing perfect. The gospel, the full revelation of Christ, whilst it rises to the glory of God in the highest and stands in presence of the inscrutable depths of God’s most holy judgment of sin in the cross, vindicates all the ways of God in creation as well as in providence. Hence the Christian, if not the Jew, can say that every creature of God is good and nothing to be rejected.”⁵
7. [Ref-0137](#), 5
8. [Ref-0137](#), 22
9. [Ref-0199](#), back cover
10. [WIKIPEDIA](#), [Theonomy](#)^d
11. [WIKIPEDIA](#), [Theonomy](#)^e

Sources:

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Ref-0137 Jacob Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks With Jesus* (Montreal, Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993).

- Ref-0199** John S. Feinberg, ed., *Continuity And Discontinuity* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1988).
- Ref-0399** Henry, M. (1996, c1991). *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible : Complete and unabridged in one volume.* Peabody: Hendrickson.
- Ref-0415** Kelly, W. (2004; 2004). *In The Beginning, And The Adamic Earth.* Galaxie Software.
- Ref-0565** Schaff, P. (1997). *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Vol. I.* (New York, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1899).
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Links Mentioned Above

- a - See http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Acts_by_Tony_Garland/32_Acts_10_1-17/index.htm.
- b - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/tg.htm>.
- c - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org>.
- d - See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theonomy>.
- e - See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theonomy>.